

FAA Facts

Federal Aviation Administration
2005

HOW DOES THAT WORK?

INVESTIGATING AIRCRAFT ACCIDENTS/INCIDENTS

Please also see "Obtaining Information about Aircraft Accidents/Incidents"

When an aircraft **accident** or **incident** occurs, Federal investigators look at all possible causes, eliminate those that are found to be not a factor, and ultimately make a determination of what happened and why. The goal of the investigation is to determine what caused it, and put the appropriate measures in place to help prevent such occurrences from happening again.

The investigations are led by either the FAA or National Transportation Safety Board (NTSB). The NTSB is the lead on **all accidents** and **some incidents**, especially those in which an **accident** was narrowly averted.

The FAA will be one of the parties assisting the NTSB in its investigations. On occasion, the NTSB will delegate authority to the FAA to serve as the lead investigating agency.

These distinctions are important to you, the reporter, because **by law, when the NTSB leads the investigation, the NTSB is the sole agency to comment on that investigation. Participating agencies releasing information without NTSB approval risk exclusion and removal from the investigative process. (Order 8200.11B).**

This means that when the NTSB is the lead, the FAA will defer all requests for comment to the NTSB. Contact information is listed on the last page of this Fact Sheet.

What is the NTSB?

The NTSB is an independent Federal agency charged by Congress with investigating every civil aviation accident in the United States and significant accidents in the other modes of transportation -- railroad, highway, marine and pipeline -- and issuing safety recommendations aimed at preventing future accidents.

NTSB investigations, which can take months to a year or more, culminate with the finding of probable cause and recommendations. The NTSB is also responsible for maintaining the government's database of civil aviation accidents.

The Federal Aviation Act authorizes the National Transportation Safety Board to investigate and report the facts, conditions and circumstances relating to civil aircraft **accidents** and the probable cause thereof. The NTSB also investigates **incidents** or circumstances in which **accidents** were narrowly averted.

Certain **incidents** involving light aircraft are investigated by the FAA, under authority delegated by the NTSB.

There is an excellent reporter fact sheet on the NTSB process at www.nts.gov. Go to “Resources for Journalists.”

What is an Accident? What is an Incident?

An aircraft **accident** means an occurrence associated with the operation of an aircraft which takes place between the time any person boards the aircraft with the intention of flight and all such persons have disembarked, and in which any person suffers death or serious injury, or in which the aircraft receives substantial damage. (49 CFR 830.2)

An aircraft **incident** is an occurrence other than an accident, associated with the operation of an aircraft, which affects or could affect the safety of operations. (49 CFR 830.2).

The investigation of aircraft **accidents** and **incidents** begins as a cooperative effort between local and state police, fire and rescue, coroner’s offices, the FAA, and the NTSB. The NTSB will be notified and a classification will be determined.

When the NTSB Leads

When the NTSB leads an investigation, the FAA participates as a member of the investigative party system. Other party members may include manufacturers, airlines and labor unions. The NTSB Investigator in Charge (IIC) is the coordinator, or lead, of the investigation.

The FAA has nine responsibilities (listed below) in aircraft investigations. In addition, the FAA has the power to enforce the Federal Aviation Regulations.

The FAA must determine whether:

- Performance of FAA facilities or functions was a factor;
- Performance of non-FAA owned and operated air traffic control facilities or navigational aids was a factor;
- Airworthiness of FAA-certificated aircraft was a factor;
- Competency of FAA-certificated airmen, air agencies, commercial operators or air carriers was involved;
- Federal Aviation Regulations were adequate;
- Airport certification safety standards or operations were involved;
- Airport security standards or operations were involved;
- Airman medical qualifications were involved;
- There was a violation of the Federal Aviation Regulations.

Sections 40113 and 44702 of Title 49 of the United States Code also require the FAA to support the NTSB by verbally informing the office of all facts, conditions and circumstances surrounding an accident in which the NTSB does not participate on scene.

Any findings from the FAA investigation become part of the NTSB investigation when the NTSB is the lead agency. *This means the NTSB is still the sole agency to release those findings.*

The First Minutes

Frequently, the first persons on the scene of an aircraft accident will be local fire, rescue and police teams.

Emergency crews on the scene notify the FAA Regional Operations Center (ROC) via phone. The ROC collects preliminary information from the local police and fire authorities, and sends pages to the appropriate FAA lines of business, including Public Affairs, as well as the NTSB.

A teleconference will be held to discuss what is known about the event. The FAA will dispatch an investigator to the scene, and the NTSB will decide if it will send the IIC.

Arrival at the Accident Scene

Local police and fire have probably already completed rescue operations. The primary job of the FAA investigator will be to secure the scene for the NTSB. The FAA will use crime scene tape to prevent onlookers from entering the area and will refer all questions to the NTSB.

If the NTSB chooses not to send an investigator, the FAA will complete the accident package, with photos, descriptions and any other information, to send to the NTSB.

Investigators on site also ensure hazardous materials are safely contained, the emergency locator transmitter is deactivated, and the flight data and cockpit voice recorders (required on larger aircraft) are located and secured. Evidence is gathered, including toxicological data, fuel samples, and pressurized systems. Witnesses and aircraft occupants (if they are not seriously injured) are interviewed separately and asked to describe in detail everything that was observed or said.

Remains of the deceased are sent to the local coroner for identification and next-of-kin notification. **Since the coroner coordinates notification, you must contact the coroner's office for identifications of the deceased. He or she will know when those identifications can be released.**

Analyzing the Details

During the investigation, certain evidence will require more detailed examination. Certain mechanical components may be sent to the manufacturer for tear-down and analysis. The IIC continually evaluates evidence as a possible causal factor. Some examples are:

- Missing aircraft extremities: wing or horizontal stabilizer tips, propeller;
- Missing flight control surfaces: rudder, elevators, ailerons, flaps, stabilizers, etc.;
- Missing fuselage;
- Pre-impact versus post-crash fire evidence;
- Metal fatigue;

- Engine power at impact;
- Evidence of an explosion;
- Meteorological conditions.

All documentation and preliminary findings are withheld from public discussion until the investigation has been completed. **Investigations are not discussed with the media until a final report has been issued.**

Final Report

If the NTSB is leading the investigation, you will find the preliminary and final reports posted on its website at www.nts.gov. Preliminary reports usually go up within a few days, and final reports within several months to a year or more.

The FAA will post a preliminary report at www.faa.gov for about one week. Scroll down to “Accident and Incident Data” and click on “Preliminary Reports.” Reports are dated the day **after** the event. Verbal preliminary and final reports on FAA investigations are available through FAA Public Affairs. **Please note that all preliminary reports are subject to change as the investigation continues.**

Any written documentation from the FAA requires a Freedom of Information request (FOIA). Once the investigation goes to the NTSB, all requests will be referred to the NTSB.

We are frequently asked for copies of air traffic recordings. Those requests must go through the FAA FOIA process.

Identities of any deceased will be available from the local coroner’s office. Identities of the survivors are available through local police, fire or the NTSB.

Key Contacts

FAA Public Affairs (Media Information) Chicago 847-294-7427/7849
(OH, MI, IN, WI, IL, MN, ND, SD, IA, MO, KS, NE)

FAA Public Affairs (Media Information)
After-hours or weekends (Ask them to page the Public Affairs Officer on duty)
OH, MI, IN, WI, IL MN, ND, SD 847/294-7410
IA, MO, KS, NE 816/329-3000

FAA FOIA
OH, MI, IN, WI, IL, MN, ND, SD Chicago 847/294-7069
FAX 847/294-7184

IA, MO, KS, NE Kansas City, MO 816/329-2425
FAX 816/329-2430

NTSB Investigating Office Chicago 630/377-8177

NTSB Public Affairs Washington, DC 202/314-6100

